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ABSTRACT

Strategies employed by college presidents in a national sample of 32 institutions were investigated in 1986-1987. The schools included eight each of major research universities, state colleges and universities, private colleges, and community colleges. Sixteen new (in office 1-3 years) and 16 experienced presidents (in office for 5 or more years) were interviewed. The interview considered presidents' responses to several questions about their initial and current actions in office. Strategy models were classified as linear, adaptive, and/or interpretive. Analysis included: strategies by institutional type, form of control, and historical time of the president's entrance into office; the initial strategy versus current strategies of experienced presidents; and differences in the content of strategy (i.e., different models/types of strategy) and its complexity. The direction of presidential change was assessed in terms of the following patterns: simple retention, extinction, acquisition, diversification/elaboration, and naivete. It is concluded that in the mid- and late 1980s presidents seem to progress toward interpretive modes of thinking and acting. Thirty-five references are cited. (SW)

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STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP:
THE CHANGING ORIENTATIONS OF COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, November 21-24, 1987. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP:
THE CHANGING ORIENTATIONS OF COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

When asked about the important things they did when they first assumed the presidency, three presidents respond[1]:

> President 1: I told them [the faculty] what I thought this college should be doing to be great ... I told them what my agenda would be ... a strategic plan that would give the college time to plan for excellence. What we are looking at is not a plan but at a constant process of planning with objectives, target dates. So that once you complete one objective all you have to do is look at the next one in the sequence.
>
> President 2: As president, I have become involved in re-modeling, in developing new programs ... I need someone who can market the college, and market me ... Someone who can get me out into the community to build the image--that this is a place you want to send your kids, to get donations. There was a severe enrollment decline here last year. ... I should have filled the [administrative position responsible for recruitment, public relations] right away [when I came in] ... we probably would have made our FTE.
>
> President 3: [On starting the presidency,] I have a process in mind, not a plan ... One must understand the institution's ethos and goals ... I want to put people in place and then let them do their thing ... My real job here is to be sure that the people are comfortable with their roles and to fill any holes.

These voices reflect the thinking and involvement of new college presidents as they talk about their first actions in office. But these three presidents talk about different things: They have entered office in different ways, and have taken assorted actions for equally assorted reasons.

The three presidents also have diverse understandings of what it means to act effectively as a president, and they seem to be working toward different ends. President 1, for example, reflects a linear strategy. He is bringing rationality to his college by presenting the faculty with a goal and instituting a planning process that moves clearly toward goal achievement on a step-by-

step basis. The actions of President 2 reflect adaptive strategy. His attention is on "the environment"-- the world outside on which the college's survival depends, a world that provides sustenance in the form of "enrollments" and "donations." This president is prepared to "re-model" the college, to re-configure programs to meet "the market's demand" because FTE's represent the life of the college. President 3 uses interpretive strategy. He sees himself and others in the college as forging an affiliation, and believes that the life and activities of the organization hinge on the good health of that affiliation--on the willingness of people to join, stay, and contribute to organizational life in ways that are meaningful to themselves and to the other affiliates. He gives attention to developing and caring for that affiliation.

The presidents' responses reflect different conceptions of how organizations work. They also embody different personal understandings about the "right" actions, or the "most effective" actions, that new presidents might take. This paper examines presidential strategy as a reflection of what the president, as strategist, knows, believes, and understands about effective behavior in organizations.

Theoretical Perspective and Purpose of the Study

The nature of presidential work and responsibility has been described extensively (e.g., Berendzen, 1986; Kauffman, 1980; Kerr and Gade, 1986; Vaughan, 1986) and classified according to various presidential roles, styles, and approaches (e.g., Benezet, et al, 1981; Cohen and March, 1986; Fisher, 1984; Kauffman, 1984; Ryan, 1984). These descriptions, typologies, and perspectives show that college and university presidents differ from each other in the ways they enact their roles and in how they do their work. However, little research exists on the beliefs, ideas, and expectations that underlie the different patterns of presidential behavior, how those ideas differ over time and place, or which seem to work best and under what circumstances. By focusing on presidential strategy, this study considers the thinking that influences presidential behavior.

Traditional definitions view strategy as a guide to future action or as goals to be achieved purposefully (e.g., Ackoff, 1970; Ansoff, et al, 1976; Anthony, 1965; Chandler, 1963; Steiner, 1969, 1979; Vancil, 1977). In contrast, strategy, as used here, is more subtle and less apt to be controlled by the strategist: It is defined as a pattern of action that reflects the strategist's

understanding or beliefs about the actions he can take and the effects he can have through them (Gioia and Sims, 1986; Mintzberg, 1987; Mintzberg and Waters, 1983). The strategist develops this kind of understanding both actively and retrospectively-- that is, at the time that he takes action and after he observes its effects (see Lamb, 1987; Mintzberg, 1987; Schon, 1983; Weick, 1979). The strategist translates his observations into expectations-- what he thinks will happen if he acts in the same way at a later time, given what he "knows" from the past experience (Birnbaum, forthcoming; Bruner, 1986; Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Lord and Foti, 1986). Furthermore, strategy can change in increments as flaws in underlying expectations become apparent (Feldman, 1986; Fiske and Taylor, 1984). The development and refinement of strategy resembles common conceptions of "learning by doing," "learning through trial and error," and "learning through self-correction." Strategy, therefore, derives from and changes with experience.

A question remains about whether strategy, viewed this way, takes different forms-- whether strategists differ in how they see and define an organization and in how they conceive of "effective action." The business literature provides examples of such differences. For example, Mintzberg (1973) presents business strategy in three modes (adaptive, entrepreneurial, planning), and Glueck (1976), in four classes (stability, combination, growth, retrenchment). In the higher education literature, Chaffee (1984, 1985a, 1985b) draws on empirical and historical analyses of the concept of strategy to formulate three models of higher education strategy (linear, adaptive, interpretive), corresponding to three progressive stages of systems development (Boulding, 1956). In this study, Chaffee's three models of higher education strategy are viewed as the <u>contents</u> (substance) of strategy and strategic understanding; they represent three conceptions of <u>what</u> the strategist (in this case, a president) thinks he can do in his role, and with what effects.

<u>Linear strategy</u>. Chaffee (1985b) associates a linear model of strategy with a rudimentary, mechanistic system (Boulding, 1956). The linear model "... connote[s] the methodical, directed, sequential action involved in planning" (Chaffee, 1985b, p. 90). The linear strategist believes that he takes effective action by engaging in rational decision making-- by gathering data, analyzing them, formulating alternative actions and projecting outcomes. He is bent on goal accomplishment, usually defined as productivity, in a means-ends fashion. He gives less attention to the environment and is less apt to be concerned about accommodating to it than other strategists (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b).

Adaptive strategy. The second model of strategy is adaptive and corresponds to intermediate systems that are more sensitive and accommodating to their environments (Boulding, 1956) whereby "... taken proactively or reactively, [organizational] action is responsive to the nature and magnitude of perceived or anticipated environmental pressures" (Chaffee, 1985b, p. 91-2). An adaptive strategist believes that to be effective, he should take action directed at aligning the organization with the environment. He can do this by monitoring the environment for demands, opportunities, and threats, and changing the organization or its parts (programs, products), and by searching and moving into other environmental niches. His ultimate aim is assurance of continued inflows of resources (Chaffee, 1984, 1985b). His perspective is resource dependence (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978)

Interpretive strategy. Through the third model, interpretive strategy, "... the organization's leaders shape the attitudes of participants and potential participants toward the organization and its outputs..." (Chaffee, 1985b, p. 94). The interpretive model, which is aligned with advanced systems, requires leaders who are less concerned with hard, externalized reality, than they are with how people see, understand, and feel about it. Leaders believe that effective action involves shaping the values, symbols, and emotions that influence the behaviors of individuals. Because interpretive strategists try to create desired perceptions of the organization, much of their time is spent explaining and clarifying so that organizational actors carry out their roles in a meaningful way.

The first two models assume that information is received by leaders, and that an organization and its environment are distinct and separate entities. The third model assumes that leaders create and communicate information. It also assumes that understanding is forged, and that the boundaries between an organization and its environment are fluid, if not invisible, because they are constantly being re-defined. The different images of organization result in equally different images of appropriate and effective presidential action. This study focuses on the content of the strategic image (the type, or model, of strategy in use) and its complexity (the number of strategies in use) in different types of higher education organizations, operating under different forms of control, at different historical times, and under the leadership of presidents with varying degrees of presidential experience.

Methodology

This study identifies prominent presidential strategy in a national sample of 32 institutions-- eight each of major research universities, state colleges and universities, independent colleges, and community colleges. Data were collected during three-day visits to each institution during the 1986-7 academic year; each president was interviewed for three hours. The interview protocol was semi-structured and consisted of 40 open-ended questions.

The data for this study include presidents' responses to several questions about their initial and current actions in office. Data were abstracted from the total interview transcript, with selection based on the data's ability to respond to two analytic questions: First, what did President X do early in his term and why? Second, what is President X currently doing and why?

The data were coded as reflecting one or more of the strategy models (linear, adaptive, and/or interpretive). The study's 16 "new presidents" (in office for 1-3 years) were coded for their responses to the first analytic question only. The 16 "old presidents" (in office for 5 or more years) were coded for their responses to both analytic questions. The final data set consisted of codes reflecting the initial strategies of all 32 presidents, both old and new, and the current strategies of the 16 old presidents.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the initial-strategy codes (presidential n=32) were analyzed by institutional type, form of control (public vs. private), and historical time of the president's entrance into office (the strategies of presidents entering office over the past three years vs. those entering five or more years ago). Second, the old presidents' (n=16) initial-strategy codes were compared to their current-strategy codes. In both stages, attention was given to differences in the content of strategy (i.e., different models/types of strategy) and its complexity (use of one, two, or three strategies).

This exploratory study reports patterns of consistency and contrast in a small, purposive sample (Selltiz, et al, 1976), and as such, the results should be treated as hypotheses grounded in limited, but intensive and systematic observation.

Results

The findings of this study are presented in two sections. The first section examines the strategic approaches of the old and new presidents (n=32) when they

first entered the presidential office (called "initial strategies"). It considers the number of strategies that the presidents used (complexity), and the specific types of strategies that they favored (content). It describes how presidents entering office at different historical times, and in different types of institutions, under different forms of control, varied in their strategic approaches.

The second section compares the old presidents' (n=16) initial strategies to their current strategies. It shows how the strategies of the old presidents changed over their years in office-- for example, whether they used more or fewer strategies (complexity), and whether they relied on different types of strategy (content), as they matured in office.

The Initial Strategies of Old and New Presidents

The effects of historical time. This research reveals a strong linkage between environmental change (history) and strategic complexity: The strategic approaches of presidents who have just recently entered office (new presidents) tend to be more complex than those of presidents who began their terms earlier (old presidents). Table 1 presents data to support this conclusion: Only one out of 16 old presidents used two strategies together, in comparison to 9 out of 16 new presidents who used this more complex form.

TABLE 1

Complexity of Initial Presidential Strategy: Comparison of Old and New Presidents*

	Number of Strategies Used:			
	One	Two	None	Total
Old Presidents	13 (81%)	1 (6%)	2 (13%)	16 (100%)
New Presidents	7 (44%)	9 (56%)	0	16 (100%)
All	20 (63%)	10 (31%)	2 (6%)	32 (100%)

* No president used all three strategies during early years.

From a content perspective, changes in the environment also seem to account for increased use of adaptive and interpretive strategy. Table 2 shows that adaptive strategy was used by three times as many new presidents as old presidents. Interpretive strategy was almost double among new presidents in comparison to old presidents. Linear strategy, however, was used by as many new presidents as old, indicating that recent entrants to the presidency are as likely to be using it as earlier entrants were.

TABLE 2

The Types* of Strategies that Old and New Presidents Use (Content): Initial Actions

(n=32)	Presidents:		
	Old	New	All
Strategy Content:			
Linear	8 (25%)	8 (25%)	16 (50%)
Adaptive	3 (9%)	10 (31%)	13 (41%)
Interpretive	4 (13%)	7 (22%)	11 (34%)

* Presidents with complex strategic approaches (using two strategies) were counted twice.

Presidents taking office today (new presidents) use linear, adaptive, and interpretive modes differently than presidents who took office in the past (old presidents). Table 3 shows that a president initiating his term in the past was far more likely to use linear strategy by itself than a president taking office today. Presidents entering office today (new presidents) tend to incorporate the linear mode within a more complex strategic approach. Table 3 also shows that the new presidents use the adaptive mode in combination with other strategies to a greater extent than the presidents who started their terms five or more years ago. They are also using interpretive strategy differently. In the past, presidents used it by itself, but today it is as likely to be used alone as in combination with other strategic modes.

In summary, presidents entering office today are more apt to use adaptive and interpretive strategies, and they are likely to have a more complex strategic approach, than

presidents who took office at an earlier time. Earlier entrants were more likely to rely on linear strategy by itself.

TABLE 3

Content and Complexity* of Initial Presidential Strategy: Comparison of Old and New Presidents

(n=32)	Presidents:	
	Old	New
Strategy Content and Complexity:		
Linear, Alone	7 (22%)	2 (6%)
Linear, Complex	1 (3%)	6 (19%)
Adaptive, Alone	2 (6%)	2 (6%)
Adaptive, Complex	1 (3%)	8 (25%)
Interpretive, Alone	4 (13%)	3 (9%)
Interpretive, Complex	0 (0)	4 (13%)

* Presidents with complex strategic approaches (using two strategies) were counted twice.

The effects of the organizational setting: institutional type and control. When initial presidential strategies were compared according to institutional type, only one pattern emerged: University presidents emphasized linear strategy more than the other presidents. 6 out of 8 university presidents used it (in comparison to an average usage rate of 3 out of 8 for the other institutional categories). No other effects were found in relation to either the content or complexity of presidential strategy.

A comparison of initial presidential strategies by institutional control suggests that presidents of public and private institutions may differ in the type of strategy they use (content), but not in their strategic complexity. Public-sector presidents (40%) are somewhat more apt to use interpretive strategy than their counterparts in the private sector (25%), but presidents of private institutions (50%) seem more likely to use adaptive strategy than the heads of public institutions (35%). Linear strategy, however is used equally in both sectors (50% for each).

The Changing Strategies of Old College Presidents

The sample's 16 old presidents entered office between 1964 and 1981. They had persisted in office for at least five years and for as long as twenty-two years at the time of the interview. These presidents' accounts of their initial and current actions indicate dramatic strategic shifts over their terms of office.

First, the study found that the old presidents' strategic approaches were simple during their early years and more complex later. Table 4 shows that only one president was using complex strategy when he first entered office; the other 15 used only one strategy or had no clear strategy. However, by the time of the interview, 7 of the old presidents (44%) were using complex strategy, including 2 (13%) who were using all three modes.

TABLE 4

Old Presidents' Initial Strategies Compared to Their Current Strategies: Changes in Complexity

	Number of Strategies Used:			
(n=16)	One	Two	Three	None
Old Presidents':				
Initial Strategies	13 (81%)	1 (6%)	0 (0)	2 (13%)
Current Strategies	9 (56%)	5 (31%)	2 (13%)	0 (0)

The increase in strategic complexity means that the content of presidential strategy broadened. Table 5 (next page) shows that adaptive strategy doubled in use, and interpretive strategy almost tripled. Linear strategy, however, remained level over these presidents' years in office.

The data show that the old presidents used linear, adaptive, and interpretive strategies in distinctive ways (see Table 6). When they entered office half of these presidents used linear strategy by itself; the same number used it at the time of the interviews, but within a more complex strategic approach. Very few of the presidents used adaptive strategy early in their terms, but about one-third were using it, mostly within complex forms, at the time of the interviews. About one-fourth of these

TABLE 5

Types* of Strategies Reflected in Old Presidents' Initial and Current Actions (Content)

(n=16)	Old Presidents: Initial Strategy	Current Strategy
Strategy Content:		
Linear	8 (50%)	8 (50%)
Adaptive	3 (19%)	6 (38%)
Interpretive	4 (25%)	11 (69%)

* Presidents with complex strategic approaches were counted twice or three times, once for each strategy used.

TABLE 6

Content and Complexity* of Old Presidents' Initial and Current Strategies

(n=16)	Old Presidents' Strategy: Initial	Current
Strategy Content and Complexity:		
Linear, Alone	7 (44%)	2 (13%)
Linear, Complex	1 (6%)	6 (38%)
Adaptive, Alone	2 (13%)	1 (6%)
Adaptive, Complex	1 (6%)	5 (31%)
Interpretive, Alone	4 (25%)	6 (38%)
Interpretive, Complex	0 (0)	5 (31%)

* Presidents with complex approaches were counted twice or three times, once for each strategy used.

presidents used interpretive strategy, by itself, early in their terms. When the interviews were conducted, about one-third were using it alone, but just as many were using it in combination with linear and/or adaptive strategy.

In summary, presidents seem likely to use interpretive and adaptive strategy later, rather than earlier in their terms, and their overall approach appears to be more complex at the later time point.

This research also investigated the direction of presidential change over the term of office. Table 7 reports the findings of this analysis in five parts, including the number of presidents who: (1) retained the initial strategy with no additions (simple retention), (2) retained the initial strategy and diversified (diversification), (3) discarded the initial strategy (extinction), (4) gained linear, adaptive, or interpretive modes over the term of office (acquisition), (5) never used linear, adaptive, or interpretive modes (naivete).[2]

TABLE 7

How the Old Presidents' Strategy Changed: Patterns of Individual Change from Initial to Current Strategy

n=16	Strategy: Linear	Adaptive	Interpretive
SIMPLE RETENTION: Initial strategy retained, no strategy added	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)
DIVERSIFICATION, ELABORATION: Initial strategy retained, and others gained	5 (31%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)
EXTINCTION: Initial strategy discarded	2 (13%)	1 (6%)	0
ACQUISITION: Strategy gained while in office	2 (13%)	4 (25%)	7 (44%)
NAIVETE: Strategies never displayed, untried	6 (38%)	9 (56%)	5 (31%)

These data suggest that presidential strategy changes in patterned directions, depending on a president's initial strategic mode:

(1) Presidents who initiated their terms with interpretive strategy, used alone, tended to retain it in its single form. Interpretive strategy seems capable of persisting through a president's organizational career with minimal elaboration. The data also show that during the term of office, more presidents gained interpretive strategy than linear or adaptive, suggesting that it may be a critical center of presidential "learning on the job."

(2) Most presidents who began with a linear approach diversified by adding adaptive and/or interpretive strategy. Linear strategy appears to be retained over the years by most presidents who enter office with it, suggesting that it is useful, and perhaps comfortable to many presidents. However, its tendency to diversify, coupled with its records of "gains" balanced by "extinctions", suggests that it may be more useful in combination than alone, and that it may not be absolutely necessary to all presidents.

(3) Few of these presidents began their terms in an adaptive mode, but several gained it over their years in office. In general, however, the old presidents were less familiar with adaptive strategy than with linear or interpretive. The adaptive model appears to work as an additive strategic element but not as a core.

Conclusions and Discussion

This research identified two scenarios of change for presidential strategy. First, as the environment changed (i.e., history), the initial strategies of entering presidents showed an increasing complexity: Today, new presidents are relying on adaptive and interpretive strategies, as parts of complex strategic approaches, to a far greater extent than presidents who began their terms five or more years ago. At the same time, the presidents who initiated their terms five or more years ago (and who managed to persist in office) developed more complex strategies over their years in office: They made substantial gains in interpretive and adaptive strategy. Thus, the strategies that old and new presidents are using at this time look remarkably alike: Both are complex, and both include adaptive and interpretive modes.

If strategy, as a pattern of action, reflects the strategist's beliefs about what an organization is and how organizations work, these changes, occurring

simultaneously, suggest that the thinking of contemporary college presidents -- both old and new -- is more diverse and complex than it was for the college presidents of the past. It is likely that college presidents have learned to think and act differently than they used to because new demands have been made of them and their organizations. In the past, a rational management approach (represented by linear strategy) may have been desirable, perhaps expected, for presidents, and it would have been an appropriate paradigm during a time of growth. However, the current environment, characterized as a period of endangered resources, forces college presidents to think and act adaptively and interpretively.

College presidents may have just recently learned that a linear approach works well in organizing readily available resources, but that it is not adequate when the need is to acquire, create, or do without what was available before. The presidents who persisted in office probably learned this lesson the hard way; those who failed to learn it may have left their posts. It is possible that current times, marked by diverse demands and pressures, force institutions to select new presidents with diverse strategies (a complex strategic approach), and to retain only those old presidents who are flexible enough to learn new strategies. The reverse may have been true two decades ago.

Although environmental shifting offers an appealing explanation for the increased complexity of presidential strategy, other interpretations are possible. First, a period of sustained presidential activity may force presidents to learn to behave in diverse ways: They are captive learners in the presidential office. Second, old presidents may remember selectively. For example, a president might recall the most helpful element of his initial strategy and forget others, or he might remember the element that did not work and which he replaced later. The exact cause of the increased complexity identified in this study is unclear, and it is possible that all these factors -- a changing environment, the experience of the presidency itself, growing familiarity with one organization, selective memory -- contribute to the pattern of increasing strategic complexity.

Despite the fact that the causes of change are equivocal, several conclusions can be drawn about the nature of presidential strategy as it is being enacted in the mid- and late 1980s:

(1) Presidents seem to progress toward interpretive modes of thinking and acting. This conclusion is based on the following findings: that linear strategists tend to gain interpretive competencies over their years in the presidential office, that interpretive strategists keep

their approach intact, and that entering presidents today are more likely to be using interpretive strategy than they would have in the past.

(2) Because the initial actions of university presidents strongly reflect linear strategy, and because linear strategy tends to diversify over the term of office, the strategy of university presidents may become more complex, with presidential experience, than the strategy of other presidents. In particular, the strategy of state college and community college presidents may appear to be more "simple" (because, as part of the public sector, they make more use of interpretive strategy which can retain its singular form over years in office). This simple/complex classification could be misleading, however, in that interpretive strategy, in and of itself, may be more complex than either linear or adaptive strategy (see Boulding, 1956).

(3) The sample shows a relative absence of "persisting presidents" (old presidents) who had used adaptive strategy by itself early in their terms. This raises the question of whether adaptive strategy contributes to career difficulties for presidents who use it, in single form, during their early years.[3] However, the adaptive mode does appear to be helpful if it is used in combination with another strategy-- an approach more common among mature presidents than new ones.

The study raises questions for researchers and leadership development specialists about how and why presidents change, or are required to change, in how they think about their work and their colleges, and in how they act. It also raises questions about what presidents need to know to be effective: What competencies and skills does each strategic approach require? What kinds of circumstances require a particular type(s) of strategy and how do presidents know that? --and learn it? How do presidents shift among strategies? How do individual strategies "couple" within complex strategic approaches (e.g., hierarchically, randomly)? What kinds of presidential experiences engender both adaptive and interpretive understanding? What kinds of pre-presidential experiences engender interpretive competence? To what extent does a president share interpretive, linear, and adaptive roles with other key organizational leaders (for example, the vice presidents or faculty leaders)? Can a typology of interpretive strategy be developed relative to the diverse issues or constituencies it addresses? Do presidents apply different forms of interpretive strategy when dealing with faculty, trustees, community supporters, state officials, or others?

Notes

1. To comply with pledges of confidentiality, all sample institutions are presented as "colleges," and all presidents are referred to with the masculine pronoun.

2. Table 7 reports five usage patterns (row) for each of the three strategies (column). For example, the column for linear strategy should be read as follows: One president used linear strategy, by itself, at the beginning of his presidency, and was still using it alone at the time of the interview (5+ years later). Five presidents started with linear strategy and added adaptive and/or interpretive modes so that their overall approach was more diverse at the time of the interview. Two presidents started with linear strategy but were not using it at the time of the interview, while another two came into office without it but gained it along the way. Six presidents entered office without linear strategy and were not using it at the later time point either. Columns for adaptive and interpretive strategy should be read the same way.

3. Since this study did not have access to presidents who did not persist in office, only conjecture is possible.

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